

**Death Representation in Sylvia Plath's
Selected Poems**

Mohamed Fleih Hassan
Assistant Instructor
English Dept./College of Arts
AL-Anbar University

Abstract

Death is one of the significant and recurrent themes in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. This paper aims at showing the poet's attitudes towards death. Certain poems are selected to show the poet's different attitudes to death: death as a rebirth or renewal, and death as an end. Most obvious factors shaped her attitudes towards death were the early death of her father that left her unsecured, and the unfaithfulness of her husband, Ted Hughes, who left her dejected and melancholic. Plath's '*Two views of a Cadaver Room*', '*Sheep in Fog*', '*A Birthday Present*', '*Edge*', and '*I Am Vertical*' are selected to outline her various perspectives towards death.

* * * * *

Generally speaking, death is represented in literature in various ways shifting from being an ominous terrifying force to a means of fulfillment and new beginnings.

Death came to be a recurrent theme in Sylvia Plath's poetry due to the sudden death of her father. His death left the daughter with powerful feelings of defeat, resentment, grief and remorse. So the absence of the father had influenced her emotional life negatively to the extent that it is reflected clearly in her poems.

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) passed in periods of depression and there were precursors of suicidal act through fits of breakdown. Among the reasons for her early depression are the early death of her father that left her unsecured and her failure to attend a writing class at Harvard. Though she got a chair as a college guest-editor of the *Mademoiselle*, but she got monotonous with nothing to fall back on in New York. She broke down with the unfulfillment of her dream of being a successful writer. Therefore, she took an over-dose of sleeping-pills to end her misery, but she was saved.¹

After successful psychiatric sessions of recovery, Plath met Ted Hughes at Cambridge and they got married in 1956. She found in him a motive and substitute for the absence of the father. Hughes believed in her exceptional gift. In that period, the couple got success and fame with their poetic development, especially when they got children. Her poems had been published in Britain and America like, *The Colossus* 1960, which dealt with Plath's preoccupation with ideas of death and rebirth.

Hughes' love affair with another woman broke the heart of Plath, who suffered the devastation of the broken marriage. Shifting into a new flat in London, she started writing poems of rage, despair, love and vengeance but her poems were slowly accepted for publication. She suffered the traumatic breakdown and melancholia that she put her head in the oven in 11 April, 1963.²

Death came to be a recurrent theme in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, and this theme has been represented in different ways in her poems. She did engage the reader either in a personal or an impersonal way to view death either as a liberating force or troubling depressing experience. Her depiction of death is reflected by the use of such techniques as imagery, language, structure, and tone.

Her negative attitude towards death is caused by the early death of her father that left her dejected. In her poem '*Two views of a Cadaver Room*' (1959), she presents a pessimistic point of view towards death. This poem recounts an experience she had while dating a young Harvard medical student. She followed her boyfriend and some other medical students into an operating room where the students were busily dissecting a preserved corpse. The speaker and her boyfriend are horrified by the experience, the narrator offers two views of the cadaver room as alternate possibilities of depicting death in art; the physical view of death and the romantic view of death. One view is epitomized by the cadaver room contrasting the romantic one of death, which is represented by a detail from a Brueghel painting depicting two lovers, who are spell bounded by one another and careless to the destruction and devastation around them.³

The poem is written in two parts. The first part creates a futile setting in which things are described in a 'dissecting room', which suggests a mood of despondency. She did so by the use of wastelandish simile through comparing cadaver with 'burnt turkey':

The day she visited the dissecting room
They had four men laid out, black as burnt turkey,
Already half unstrung. (II.1-3)

The place 'dissecting room' suggests mercilessness and dehumanization. The dead bodies are anatomized and bones are removed which suggest a horrible image. The poetess compares death with the dissector, in which it takes off the spirit out of the body as did the doctor in dissecting the major constituents of bodies. Death here represents a terrifying force that annihilates man's life. The dissecting room serves as the epitome of scientific space, which is to say death's space. And this is the space not only of female witnessing and female passivity, '*she could scarcely make out*

anything/ In that rubble of skull plates and old leather', but also of a bestowal from male to female, from male scientist to female poet.

The process of dissecting the dead body indicates the savageness and carelessness of the surgeon, who cuts out the heart; the symbol of man's life and feelings. The surgeon is associated with death in the sense that he extracts the heart of the body, '*He hands her the cut-out heart like a cracked heirloom.*' The simile presents a very useless pessimistic image for the heart. The heart is not only reduced to a non-functioning machine, but a man hands death to a woman. The heart is the dearest to man and is compared to the heirloom which contains the memory of the dead, but it is uprooted maliciously. Death came to be an unavoidable inheritance.⁴

In many of her poems, what Plath perceives is a death-figure which threatens to swallow her up unless she can reassert her living identity by "fixing" and thus immobilizing her enemy in a structured poetic image. Plath transforms death by assuming the role of a photo-journalist who observes the details in a way as to control the scene with the transforming power of language. She follows the technique of fusing various visual images in a meaningful way. Therefore, she transcends the literal immediacy of what she sees and creates order out of chaos.⁵

The second part paradoxes the first in showing a couple who are ignorant of the horrors of death. Their ignorance of the shadow of death around them intensifies their tragic catastrophic end:

Two people only are blind to the carrion army:
He, afloat in the sea of her blue satin
Skirts, sings in the direction
Of her bare shoulder, while she bends,
Fingering a leaflet of music, over him,

Death Representation in Sylvia Plath's Selected Poems
Mohamed Fleih Hassan

Both of them deaf to the fiddle in the hands
Of the death's-head shadowing their song. (II. 13-19)

Plath thinks that the second view was untenable. Confronting the literal physicality of death (as the narrator does in the first stanza), and ignoring that reality (as the lovers do in the Brueghel painting) seem hopelessly romantic and naive. The only way to relinquish the painful awareness of impending death is by relinquishing life itself. Plath committed suicide in her flat moving herself and her work into the domain of myth and psycho-mystical speculation.

The second view of death is the bestowal of death that is interrupted by art. Paradoxically, this interruption of death by art is itself a kind of death, a freezing of life. The poem surveys with an eye which is blind and an ear which is deaf. If the lovers' blindness and deafness to death's music permits them to 'flourish', then this flourishing is 'not for long'. Paradoxically, the work of art saves from death by paralyzing or fixing the living in an absolute present, which is to say a perfected present, but without future:

This stalling of death's triumph by art, this resistance of art to death, is itself a kind of death, since it reminds us that those lovers captured in art's absolute present can do nothing at all. Just as there are two kinds of music here – the death's-head's and the lovers' – so art is not placed in any simple opposition to death.⁶

There are two kinds of death: on the one hand, death as process, as rebirth or renewal, as imaginary; and, on the other hand, death as end, as factuality. Plath rides into death in '*Sheep in Fog*' (1963) but death is no longer conceived as renewal. The objective in '*Sheep in Fog*' becomes the 'dark water':

They threaten

To let me through to a heaven
Starless and fatherless, a dark water.

(II. 13-15)

The sense of dissolution is overpowering in this poem through the description of the background of the poem. Each line and each stanza of the poem concerns the disappearance of something. 'hills step off into whiteness', 'Morning has been blackening' and the starless heaven leave her dejected and wretched.⁷

'*Sheep in Fog*' suggests that there is a radical sundering of poet and poetry, a death of the poet that is the life of the poetry, if only as that which is in mourning for the poet. The impersonality of Plath's later poetry is not arrived at through an ethical self-sacrifice of the poet's empirical, autobiographical self in the interests of a universal validity, a kind of immortality or proof against death. Rather, it is an impersonality in which there is a highly paradoxical and unstable relation between poet and poetry.⁸

'*A Birthday Present*' (1962) is another dramatic monologue in which terror and death predominate. The persona longs to know the gift presented by his friend. The speaker, her friend, and the object "talk" to each other in the kitchen. She imagines that the present may be 'bones', 'a pearl button', and 'an ivory tusk'. Each of these things has white colour and suggests the nature of the birthday present that she wants. The three white objects—bones, pearl, and ivory tusk—all suggest death because they were once part of living organisms. The persona speaks of the veils around the present. In order to remove the concealing veil, which causes her anxiety and fear, the speaker demands an end to the screening off of death from view. She compares her life at the end of the poem to the arrival by mail of parts of her own corpse. At the end, the speaker demands as

Death Representation in Sylvia Plath's Selected Poems
Mohamed Fleih Hassan

her birthday present not the previously mentioned symbols of death or the figure representing death, but death itself: ⁹

If it were death
I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless
eyes.
I would know you were serious.
There would be a nobility then, there would be a
birthday. And the knife not carve, but enter
Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,
And the universe slide from my side.

(II. 52-58)

The poem dramatizes her birthday to be her death. The drama of '*A Birthday Present*' is frightening in its transformation of a domestic and happy occasion into a celebration of suicide. It captures the movement of the speaker's mind as she throws herself into the sequence of steps that might lead her to kill herself.

Plath's second perspective towards death is that it may be chosen by the individual himself as a means of self-destruction, rather than acting as a horrible exterminating force. The poetess aims to show the suffering and agony of the persona in selecting death as a means of liberation of the antagonistic world of the person.

This perspective is reflected in Plath's '*Edge*', which was written on 5 February 1963 and is thought to be Plath's last poem. According to Seamus Heaney, one of the biographers of Plath, the poem was a suicide note, which is to say an entirely personal, autobiographical communication from a distressed melancholic woman. For this reason, the poem is limited by the literal death of the poet, a death that cannot help but be read back into the poem. ¹⁰

This death is a negativity that renews, and works within an economy of life. This is not just an imaginary death, but death as a

figure for the imagination itself, as a negativity that may be harnessed in the interests of life. This poem carries the reader not only to the very limit of life, but also to the limit of poetry. And yet, if in this poem the woman is 'perfected', it is through a death that takes the form of an aesthetic object, but in which the emphasis none the less falls very much on illusion. The speaker in this poem doesn't endure the anguish of his life and feels that his misery is over:

The illusion of a Greek necessity
Flows in the scrolls of her toga
Her bare
Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over. (II. 4-8)

The bare feet symbolize the lack of protection and immunity. The tone looks submissive but it indicates the willingness to accept death as an outlet and escape of the aggressive world.

The persona feels alienated in the world around him. No one cares for the persona's death even the moon, *'The moon has nothing to be sad about/ Staring from her hood of bone.'* Therefore, she starts looking for something beyond death, which is the longing for perfection. Usually roses symbolize purity, so she compares her folding of the dead bodies of children as petals of a rose close. Therefore she thinks that through death, she will have a new beginning.¹¹

Death as a means of rebirth is reflected in Plath's *'I Am Vertical'*. She sets images taken from nature as a background of her poem. This use of nature as a setting for her poem shows death not as a horrible monstrous thing. She presented two fruitful lively images of nature and then she negates her likeness to them:

I am not a tree with my root in the spoil

Death Representation in Sylvia Plath's Selected Poems
Mohamed Fleih Hassan

Sucking up minerals and motherly love
So that each March I may gleam into leaf,
Nor am I the beauty of a garden bed
Attracting my share of Ahs and spectacularly painted,
Unknowing I must soon unpetal. (II. 2-7)

The persona feels rejection of the surroundings when *'the trees and flowers have been strewing their cool odours. I walk among them, but none of them are noticing.'* This represents the negligence of society and the social restraints that the individual feels. *'each March I may gleam into leaf'* suggests the continuity of life and regeneration. She is longing to be united with nature via death; the nature that symbolizes serenity and tranquility, *'Then the sky and I are in open conversation'*. The word 'sky' gives death the sense of spirituality and elevation. The speaker is not satisfied in her life and she accepts death as a means for recognition:

And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:
Then the trees may touch me for once,
and the flowers have time for me. (II. 19-20)

Plath's life is ended in a world of death and despondency from which there is no rebirth or transformation. Yet her powerful ambivalent use of images and its commitment to rebirth, dramatizes more than the despairing end of her life. Plath was a woman who could throw herself into the center of death in order to be recalled to life in a different form of existence.

NOTES

- 1- Robyn Marsack, Sylvia Plath, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), p.4
- 2- Marsack, p. 11
- 3- <http://www.....>, New Maps for Contemporary Poetry: Sylvia Plath.htm, p. 11

- 4- <http://www.ShaneWeller.com>, The Deaths of Poetry: Sylvia Plath and the Ethics of Modern Elegy, Textual Practice, Mar2006, Vol. 20 Issue 1, p. 56
- 5- Jack Folsom, Death and Rebirth in Sylvia Plath's *Beck - Plague*, (n.p :Temple University Press, 1994), p.1
- 6- Weller, p. 57
- 7- Marsack, p. 66
- 8- Weller, p. 63
- 9- Jon Rosenblatt, Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation, (North Carolina: Chapel Hill, Inc., 1979), p.132
- 10- Weller, p. 49
- 11- Janice Markey, A Journey into the Red Eye. The Poetry of Sylvia Plath - A Critique, (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1993), p.2

Bibliography

- Dispenser, Sally. Life and death: the white horse. Psychodynamic Practice, Nov2004, Vol. 10 Issue 4.
- Folsom, Jack. Death and Rebirth in Sylvia Plath's *Beck - Plague*. Montana State University, 1994.
- Markey, Janice. A Journey into the Red Eye. The Poetry of Sylvia Plath - A Critique. London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1993.
- Marsack, Robyn. Sylvia Plath. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992.
- Marjorie, Perloff. Sylvia Plath's 'Collected Poems': A Review-Essay. American Literary Study, Vol. XI, No. 2, Autumn, 1981.
- Rosenblatt, Jon. Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation. North Carolina: Chapel Hill, Inc., 1979.

Death Representation in Sylvia Plath's Selected Poems
Mohamed Fleih Hassan

Thwaite, Anthony. Poetry Today: A Critical Guide to British Poetry
1960-1984. England: Longman Group Ltd., 1985.

Works Cited:

<http://www.....> New Maps for Contemporary Poetry: Sylvia Plath htm. Retrieved from the internet in 2007.

<http://www.PoemHunter.Com.>, Sylvia Plath: Poems, The World's Poetry Archive. 2004. Retrieved from the internet in 2007.

<http://www.ShaneWeller.com>, The Deaths of Poetry: Sylvia Plath and the Ethics of Modern Elegy, Textual Practice, Mar2006, Vol. 20 Issue 1.

مفهوم الموت في قصائد مختارة لسيلفيا بلاث

محمد فليح حسن/قسم اللغة الانكليزية
كلية الآداب/جامعة الانبار

ملخص البحث

مفهوم الموت هو احد الأفكار المهمة والأساسية في قريض ألساعره سيلفيا بلاث. يهدف هذا البحث إلى إبراز وجهات النظر المتباينة للشاعرة إزاء مفهوم الموت. فقد جرى اختيار عدد من القصائد لإيضاح مواقفها إزاء الموضوع، فالموت ولادة لحياة جديدة أو نهاية لها. ومن بين أكثر العوامل أثراً في شعرها هو موت أبيها المبكر والذي تركها بلا أمان وخيانة زوجها الشاعر تيد هيووز مما تسبب في شعورها بالأسى العميق. وأخيراً اختيرت: "وجهتان لغرفة التشريح"، "الأغنام في الضباب"، "هدية عيد ميلاد"، "الهاوية"، و"أنا قائم" لشرح الأبعاد المختلفة للموت لدى هذه الشاعرة.